

Illinois U Library

MARCH 2, 1948

Town Meeting



BULLETIN OF AMERICA'S TOWN MEETING OF THE AIR

BROADCAST BY STATIONS OF THE AMERICAN BROADCASTING CO.



What's Wrong With the Comics?

Moderator, GEORGE V. DENNY, JR.

Speakers

AL CAPP

JOHN MASON BROWN

GEORGE J. HECHT

MARYA MANNES

(See also page 13)

COMING

—March 9, 1948—

Is Our Free Enterprise System Threatened by European Socialism?

—March 16, 1948—

Which Way America—Fascism, Communism, Socialism, or Democracy?

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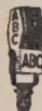
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BULLETIN OF AMERICA'S TOWN MEETING OF THE AIR

GEORGE V. DENNY, JR., MODERATOR



MARCH 2, 1948

VOL. 13, No. 45

What's Wrong With the Comics?

Announcer:

Tonight marks the 498th broadcast of America's Town Meeting of the Air which means that on March 16 we will celebrate our 500th broadcast of this series which has become a national institution.

It was on May 30, 1935, that this famous series started with a discussion of the subject "Which Way America — Fascism, Communism, Socialism, or Democracy?" On March 16, we repeat that program with two of the original speakers — Raymond Moley and Norman Thomas. The other two speakers, appraising the threats of fascism and communism, respectively, will be Dr. Leon Birkhead, president of the Friends of Democracy, and Martin Ebon, author of *World Communism Today*.

As most of you know, for the first six years, Town Meeting was broadcast only half a year each season, but by popular demand Town Meeting went on a year round basis in May, 1942, and has

continued on a year round basis ever since. At that time we began the practice of originating approximately one-half of the programs on tour and one-half in Town Hall, New York, our aim being to make it truly an America's Town Meeting of the Air.

Now to preside over our discussion here is our moderator, the president of Town Hall and founder of America's Town Meeting of the Air, Mr. George V. Denny, Jr., Mr. Denny. (*Applause.*)

Moderator Denny:

Good evening, neighbors. I'm sure that during the day most of you read your favorite newspaper and if you scanned the headlines of the front page they probably read something like this: "Vandenburg Urges Speed to Balk Threat Against Peace by Russia"; "Aviation Board Asks 35,000 Warplanes; Says Attack On U. S. Is Possible."

But the really important news

for a great many Americans, I suspect, is not found on the front pages, or in most cases, even in the front sections of their newspapers. Indeed, a summary of the important events of the day for some 40,000,000 people might sound something like this: "Dick Tracy Smashes Villainous Shoulders" or "Daddy Warbucks Returns" or "Fearless Fosdick Captures Chippendale Chair." (*Laughter.*)

Probably more Americans read the comic page than any other feature of their newspaper and hundreds of different comic magazines may be purchased at any newsstand in the country. Is it any wonder then that your Town Meeting has decided to explore this world of fantasy that has captured the interest of Americans of all ages?

Let's take a trip to the land of the comics and find out what really makes it tick. Why do comic pages draw more readers than front pages? Is this good or is it bad? Is there anything wrong with the comics?

Our guests, John Mason Brown and Marya Mannes, both authors and lecturers, feel that there most emphatically is something wrong and they will tell you why in no uncertain terms in just a moment.

On the other hand, Mr. George Hecht, publisher of *Parents' Magazine* and other publications, and Al Capp, creator of "Li'l Abner" come staunchly to the defense of this \$60,000,000 industry.

Parents and children, psychiatrists and psychologists, churchmen and laymen, GI's and John Does hold strong opinions on this question. So let's hear first from one of the nimblest minds in the world of literature, Mr. John Mason Brown, author and critic and associate editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and Town Hall lecturer. Mr. Brown. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Brown:

The comics, alas, like death and taxes, are very much with us and to my way of thinking they are equally unfunny. Why they are called comics when people who read them, young and old, always look like so many undertakers during the reading, eludes me. But we'll let that pass, just as most of us as parents have had to let comics pass into our homes, against our will, against our wishes, against our better judgment.

I love comedians, the highest, the lowest, and the toughest, and I love cartoons, too, but my allergy to comics is complete, utter, absolute. I know there are bad comics and I am told there are good comics. I have read them a few of both, only a few, fortunately—under protest, but I regret them both. I deplore them and, to continue the understatement, I abhor them.

So far as I am concerned, they might just as well be written in a foreign language for which no dic-

tionary has ever been published, and I wish they had been.

Let me quickly admit that I am low enough and sometimes defeated enough as a parent to make use of comics. I mean in desperate moments when, of a rainy Sunday morning or afternoon, I want peace in the home. Or when I'm traveling with my two sons on a train and I need to subdue them. Then —yes, I'll confess it—I do resort to comics, without shame, without conscience.

On such occasions, I don't so much *distribute* comics as I *administer* them to my sons (*laughter and applause*), much as a bar-keep would pour out Mickey Finns or a doctor distribute hypodermics. As knock-out drops for unruly children, as sedatives, as Maxim silencers comics do have their undeniable uses. (*Laughter*.) This much I'll concede gratefully, Mr. Hecht.

I also grant that so long as other people's children read comics, we have scant hope, and perhaps less right, to keep ours from doing so. It would be unfair for us to deny to our children what is now a group experience and when they have grown up will have become a group memory for their generation.

If I hate the comics, I promise you I have my reasons for doing so. I know that as part of every healthy diet, everyone needs a certain amount of trash. Each generation has always found its own.

The comic books, however, as they are nowadays perpetually on tap, seem to me not only to be trash but the lowest, most despicable, and most harmful and unethical form of trash. (*Laughter and applause*.)

As a rule, their word selection is as wretched as their drawing or the paper on which they are printed. They are designed for readers who are too lazy to read and who don't want to read anyway.

I won't and can't deny that comic books fascinate the young as, in terms of pigs, rabbits, rodents, morons, hillbillies, and supermen, they tell their illustrated stories. But as a writer, I resent the way in which they get along with the poorest kind of writing. I hate their lack of style! I hate their appeal to illiterate literates! I loathe their bad grammar, their tiresome toughness, their cheap thrills, and their imbecilic laughter! (*Laughter and applause*.)

I hate them for making only the story count and not the how of its telling. I detest them in spite of their alleged thrills and gags because they have no subtlety and certainly no beauty. Their power of seduction, I believe, lies in the fact that they make everything too easy.

They substitute bad drawing for good description. They reduce the wonders of the language to crude monosyllables and to narratives

which are really nothing but printed motion pictures.

What riles me when I see my children absorbed by the comics is my awareness of what they are not reading and could be reading; in other words, of the more genuine and deeper pleasures they could and should be having.

To compare Bugs Bunny or Donald Duck with the *Jungle Book* or even the *Travels of Babar*, and to set Wanda the Wonder Woman against *Alice of Wonderland*, or Batman and Robin, Dick Tracy, and Gene Autry against *Treasure Island*, or Li'l Abner, if Mr. Capp will forgive me, against Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer, or Superman and Captain Marvel against Jules Verne or *Gulliver's Travels* is to realize that between the modern cave drawing—which a comic book really is—and a real book, a good book, there is, to put it mildly, a difference, a tragic difference which is hard on the young and may be harder on the future.

Anatole France once described even the best books as being the opium of the Occident. Well, most comics, as I see them are the marijuana of the nursery! (*Laughter.*) They are the bane of the bassinet! (*Laughter.*) They are the horror of the home, the curse of the kids, and a threat to the future!

The comics offer final and melancholy proof that even among the young the mind is the most

unused muscle in the United States
(*Laughter and applause.*)

Moderator Denny:

Thank you, John Mason Brown. Well, I'd say John Mason Brown is riled. (*Laughter.*) Now, Mr. Hecht, as the successful publisher of *Parents' Magazine* and a number of comic magazines—in spite of Mr. Brown—including *True Comics*, *Jack Armstrong*, and other magazines for young people, what have you to say about his criticism?

Ever since he graduated from Cornell in 1917, George Hecht has made a success with publishing magazines which give useful information to parents and children. We are very happy to welcome him on America's Town Meeting of the Air. Mr. Hecht. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Hecht:

Nearly everybody, Mr. Brown notwithstanding, reads and enjoys the comics. Judge Albert Barnes, when he was chairman of the Board of Directors of the United States Steel Corporation, once said that at a Board meeting he found that every single member of the Board of the United States Steel read the comics.

Comics provide good entertainment and exciting adventure. We have far too little fun in this troubled world. In addition to comic strips that appear in the newspapers there are, believe it or not, 24 different comic magazines.

It is estimated that 40 million copies of comic magazines are sold

each month on the newsstands. Surveys made by impartial research firms reveal that 91 out of every 100 boys and girls 6 to 17 years of age read the comic magazines and only 9 out of a 100 do not read them at all.

Perhaps the most indisputable proof of appeal of the comic magazines is that in the Army camps during the war, comic magazines outsold even the best-selling magazines like *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Reader's Digest*, and as a matter of fact, outsold them ten to one.

The comics are really a new medium of communication, just as radio and television are new mediums of communication. I don't think that most people realize this.

Comics are a series of pictures with a minimum of text that can be read with ease and speed. Many comic magazines consist of exciting adventure stories. All children crave adventure and should have some of it, even if it is only vicarious.

Josette Frank, the children's book consultant of the Child Study Association of America, who has been for years studying the comics and wrote a book about them, recently wrote, "Children read comic magazines because they find in them the satisfaction of some real innermost need of their own.

"In this modern world, children find too little opportunity for real adventure; therefore the comics act as a release for their pent-up emo-

tions, as an escape mechanism, as a safety value. The comics are really the folklore of today."

The United States Armed Services used the comics as a means of teaching soldiers and sailors how to operate various weapons and how to conduct themselves in battle. They found that soldiers and sailors learned more rapidly by means of the comics.

In *True Comics*, which is one of the magazines that our company publishes, we teach children history and science and current events via the comics.

Through special comic folders, industrial workers are taught lessons in safety and health via the comics.

On the other hand, I admit there are a small percentage of comic magazines that I consider harmful to young readers. There are a number of comic magazines on the stands that are extremely sexy and unduly deal with the activities of criminals, which magazines I do admit are harmful to the young.

Some educational authorities declare that all comic magazines are bad. On the other hand, there are certain eminent child psychologists who state that all comic magazines are good for children inasmuch as they teach them about life.

I'm not in either camp. I believe that there are good comic magazines and bad comics just as there are good books and bad books,

good motion pictures and bad motion pictures.

I do not believe the comics magazines should be censored by the Government. I believe that the comic magazine publishers themselves should initiate a system of self-censorship, just as the motion-picture producers have for years had as an organization to censor those pictures that would otherwise bring the movie industry into disrepute.

I have been active in forming an association of the comic magazine publishers, and we are now in the process of drafting a code which we fervently hope all publishers will live up to.

I believe, Mr. Brown, that parents and teachers should not condemn all comics indiscriminately, but should encourage children to select the better comics and to avoid the inferior ones. The better comics should be commended and publicized just as the better motion pictures are commended and publicized by women's clubs, educational and church groups, and better film councils.

But no matter how you feel about the comics, there seems only one inescapable conclusion: the comics are here to stay! There is nothing wrong with the comics that good publishing cannot and will not correct. (*Applause.*)

Moderator Denny:

Thank you, Mr. Hecht. Our next speaker, Miss Marya Mannes,

comes from a family of distinguished artists. Her father is David Mannes and her uncle is Walter Damrosch. She's done sculpturing, written documentary movie poetry, articles, and stories which have been published widely. More recently, her first novel, *Message From a Stranger* was published this spring by the Viking Press. Miss Mannes has very positive opinions on tonight's question, we're happy to hear them on America's Town Meeting of the Air. Miss Marya Mannes. (*Applause.*)

Miss Mannes:

Certainly, Mr. Hecht, the comics are here to stay. If they weren't, Mr. Brown and I wouldn't be angry. But I'll open my talk with a kind word. I'm all in favor of adults looking at comic strips in the newspapers — it keeps them from reading the editorial pages (*Laughter.*) And since, by some curious coincidence, the most popular strips are neighbors of the most irresponsible press, this is an excellent thing. The strips save people from contamination and also from thought — a maturing process which is definitely un-American. (*Laughter.*)

My fight is against the power of comic books over children, because I consider them first and foremost a colossal waste of time — the infinitely precious time of growth. A child grows by learning, by playing, and by dreaming. Comics supply none of these needs.

They do not teach, Mr. Hecht, unless you consider education a series of facts coated with the laxative of fiction. They're not play, because the child is passive reading them. And they kill dreams.

They kill dreams by presenting the child with ready-made images and ready-made ideas that leave him nothing to create by himself. They do not stimulate imagination; they substitute for it.

Comics replace fantasy, which is the soul of a child, with contrived formulas of an adult mind which knows a good business when it sees one—the business of selling 40,000,000 comic books a month to children who cannot discriminate.

Comic books are not only a waste of time, but a waste of eyesight. With few exceptions, comics are very ugly—bad in drawing, bad in color, bad in print. The human beings in them are ugly even when they're meant to be handsome. Stalwart young men with coat-hanger shoulders and nutcracker jaws are travesties of the male. (*Laughter*.) The bosomy, over-painted and abysmally vulgar women are travesties of the female. The so-called funny characters are merely repulsive.

The crime and horror comics are not only ugly in appearance, but ugly in thought. Oh, yes, they make it clear that crime doesn't pay. They are full of righteous conclusions and sentiments, where right triumphs and wrong is pun-

ished, but right triumphs by force and violence; right triumphs by the fist and the gun. The impact of the fist on the jaw is the comic's law. It is an ugly law.

Comic's language is, in the main, ugly. It perverts the English language with slang, with sloppy contractions, with bad grammar. It is the speech of the vulgar and the illiterate; or, at the other extreme, so stilted in an effort towards correctness that it becomes laughable. I'm all for laughing, but I choose my comedy.

There are, of course, exceptions. It would be dishonest to deny the harmlessness of some — the Disney comics, a few westerns, some teen-age strips, or the charm and humor of a strip like "Happy, the Humbug."

It would be dishonest to deny the efforts of some others, like *True Comics*, which my opponent Mr. Hecht publishes, to supply the child with truth instead of horror.

It would be dishonest to deny the homespun comedy of Li'l Abner—Don't mention it, Mr. Capp—(*Laughter*) or the gentle satire of a strip like "Mr. and Mrs." In measured doses, these can supply the relaxation and entertainment to which a child has every right.

But the doses are not measured. Comic books are the addiction of three out of four American homes. In one out of three American homes they are virtually the only reading matter. Repeat, the ONLY reading matter.

Forty million children are growing up with this kind of nourishment, or this total absence of nourishment. The comics are not food; they are a drug.

They are killers—killers of time. What an indictment of our time that it has to be killed! What an indictment of a way of life that a child has nothing better to do than read comics!

I know by heart the arguments of the defense. Mr. Hecht has already given most of them. Comics, they say, supply a universal human need for adventure, for excitement. They are merely today's version of yesterday's dime novels or the fairy tales of the past. Nonsense, even the cheapest dime novels our fathers read as boys demanded the ability to read and to imagine. As for fairy tales and legends, they are the accretions of human experience. They are not the commercial stencils of businessmen in syndicates.

The defense will say comics give an outlet to the aggressive needs of children. Nonsense, the aggressive needs of children can be satisfied far more naturally by a game of prisoner's base. Comics are not an outlet; they are a sublimation.

The final triumphant argument for the defense is comics give people what they want, therefore they are all right. Fine; children want to go to the movies every day, listen to the radio all night, and never go to school. Is that all right?

I say it is not.

I say with Mr. Brown that the comic book is the greatest opiate on the market. I say that, with few exceptions, it is a killer of time and a killer of the imagination.

I believe it keeps a child from the joy of reading, the excitement of thought, and the happiness of play.

I believe that a steady, uncontrolled and indiscriminate diet of comic books can stunt a child's mental and spiritual growth just as much as a steady malnutrition can stunt his physical growth.

Those who make comics may not be in the business for their health but they should be in it for our children's health. Until they are they stand guilty of more than taking candy from a baby; they are taking imagination from the child—and that is a crime. (*Applause*)

Moderator Denny:

Thank you, Marya Mannes. Now, I'm sure that all of our listeners who are readers of "Li'l Abner" wish we had television here tonight so that they could see the creator of their favorite comic. There are those who say that he resembles his brain child. But the only obvious resemblance is that both are broad-shouldered, black-haired, and frequently get into scraps. Well, Mr. Capp is in our studio tonight, and he has the fourth position, but he will no sooner finish speaking his piece than Mr. Brown and Miss Mannes will

able to strike back at him right here in front of this microphone. So let's hear now from the creator of the Nation's most popular comic, Al Capp of Dogpatch—I mean, New York. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Capp:

There must have been a lot of innocent little kids who listened and I'm sure they were frightened to death listening to Mr. Brown tell them what's wrong with their comics.

I'd like to hear a Town Hall forum of the same kids on the subject, "What's Wrong With Dramatic Critics?" (*Laughter and applause.*) They might, with complete righteousness, make the same complaints about dramatic critics that Mr. Brown makes about comic strips like, for instance, "Dramatic critics are a waste of time." "Dramatic critics are very unfunny, they're bad for the eyes, they're untrue to life, they're horrible to think about." (*Laughter.*) "Dramatic critics are not only the bane of the bassinet, they're the didey service of the nursery." (*Laughter.*)

Of course, as any fool can plainly see, these kids would be wrong, because kids just aren't the best judges of dramatic critics. And this point occurred to me during Mr. Brown's speech: dramatic critics just aren't the best judges of kids. (*Applause.*)

This whole thing gives me an idea for one of my own contribu-

tions to juvenile delinquency, which I call rather defiantly my comic strip. The scene is a typical American home of a typical American family named Kinsey, of course. (*Laughter.*)

Supper is over and seated in the living room are Mr. and Mrs. Kinsey and their eleven-year-old son, Kingsblood. (*Laughter.*) They're discussing what they read in that day's typical American newspaper.

Mr. Kinsey says he's mighty pleased about the new atomic bomb which can blast the bloody brains out of two or three hundred million irritating foreigners.

Then he chats about the prize-fight in Chicago that resulted in one of the young athletes being punched to death in front of thousands of happy, cheering, typical American sports lovers. (*Laughter.*)

But Mrs. Kinsey is more interested in talking about the latest society divorce and the front page excerpts from the fun-loving young matron's diary in which she refers with fine, wholesome frankness to her dates with 20 or 30 of her husband's dipsomaniac chums. (*Laughter.*) Well, Kingsblood has gone through all that, and frankly it bored him. He's reading the one page of the family newspaper where there's real action—the comic page. (*Laughter.*)

Mrs. Kinsey, noticing that little Kingsblood isn't joining in this

uplifting discusson of the front page of their family newspaper, glances over his shoulder and screams a typical, horrified, American mother-type scream.

"Look," she screams at Mr. Kinsey, "Look at what your child is reading."

"It's only Dick Gravy," replies little Kingsblood. (I am referring here to a certain detective comic strip which shall remain nameless, because I'm too shrewd to give a rival all this valuable publicity.) (*Laughter.*)

"Only Dick Gravy, my eye," snarls his mother. "Why this thing is full of murder, crime, violence, and look, why there's even a boy in it who doesn't think that a girl in it is repulsive, so it's full of S-E-X, too." (*Laughter.*)

Mr. Kinsey speaks, "Yes, I've been reading several articles lately by several psychologists, or psychiatrists, or something, that state that these stories of murder, crime, violence and S-E-X are very bad stuff for kids."

He says, "Why do you bother with that old comic page, anyhow, son? Why don't you read the news?"

"I did, Pop," replies the lad, "And oh, boy, it's all full of murder, and crime, and violence, and S-E-X, too, Pop." (*Laughter.*)

Mr. Kinsey looks over the front page of the paper and he has to admit that the kid is right. He tears the newspaper up, cancels his subscription, and he says, "Then

according to those articles by those critics and psychologists, news bad stuff for kids. Those psychologists must be right, because as the articles about psychologists as say they're always right, and those articles must be right because they're written by other psychologists." (*Laughter.*)

"Son," Mr. Kinsey said, pullin a volume off the bookshelf, "why don't you read a good book instead, like *Oliver Twist?*"

"I read it," reports little Kinsey. "It's about a kid who falls in with a criminal named Fagin who teaches him how to commit crime." (*Laughter.*) There's a big gorilla in it, named Sikes who beats the girl to death."

"Stop," cries his father. "Stop! I can see now that the work of Charles Dickens is very bad for kids." So he tears the works of Dickens all up. (*Laughter.*) He feels he owes this to the psychologists.

Now, Mr. Kinsey, with all the articles by the psychologists in his mind, goes through his typical American family bookshelf. He re-examines *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson and he finds several very deplorable murders and lots of rip-roaring crime and violence in them, and he tears them all up.

He's very tired by this time. *Alice in Wonderland* has got to go because the Queen in that keeps saying, "Off with their heads!" and that's not only violent, but .

often results in death. (*Laughter.*)

Well, pretty soon there's nothing left in the house except a 'phone book and a volume of

Shakespeare. With a sigh, little Kingsblood picks up the volume of Shakespeare and begins to read.

With a loud roar of "No, no,

THE SPEAKERS' COLUMN

AL CAPP—Al Capp is the pen name of Alfred Gerald Caplin who was born in New Haven, Connecticut, on September 28, 1909. He was exposed to art quite young for his father made a hobby of drawing cartoons and Al's two brothers and a sister also showed some artistic talents. Shortly before his tenth birthday, Al had an accident which cost him his left leg. The next two years were spent in bed and in a wheelchair. Formerly sensitive about his disability, he spent much time and effort during and since the war in cheering up amputees in military hospitals.

In high school, Capp was excellent in English and history, but could not pass geometry, so he enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Later he studied at the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts, where he also met the girl who became Mrs. Caplin. They now have three children and live on a farm in New Hampshire.

Mr. Capp began his career as a cartoonist for Associated Press in 1932; then as an illustrator for the *Boston Sunday Post*. He was a ghost artist for several cartoonists until in 1934, he created the "Li'l Abner" strip for United Features Syndicate. This comic strip is now carried in 427 daily papers and 179 Sunday papers in the United States alone.

Mr. Capp was cited by the Secretary of the Treasury for his work for the Treasury Department. He created "Small Change," the first newspaper feature syndicated by the U. S. Government and was requested by General Hugh McNair to prepare an instructive series for the U. S. Army under the title "Private Li'l Abner."

It is not commonly known but Mr. Capp also does the plotting and dialogue for the strip "Abbie and Slats" which appears in 138 daily and 80 Sunday papers in this country.

GEORGE JOSEPH HECHT—President and publisher of *Parents' Magazine*, Mr. Hecht was born in 1895 in New York City. He attended the Ethical Culture School in New York City from 1902 until 1913 and received an A.B. degree from Cornell University in 1917. In 1919 he founded the magazine *Better Times*, which he edited until 1931. In 1926, he founded the Welfare Council of New York City and was its secretary and director from 1926 to 1945.

Since 1926, Mr. Hecht has been president and publisher of *Parents' Magazine*, and since 1936, he has been president and publisher of *School Management*. He is also the publisher of *Baby Care Manual*, *True Comics*, *Real Heroes*, *Calling All Girls*, and other magazines.

He is president of *Parents' Institute*, vice-president of the *Pepsi-Cola Company*, vice president and treasurer of the Child Welfare Information Service, Inc., and director of Associated Youth Serving Organizations, Inc.

He is head of the U. S. Government Bureau of Cartoons of the U. S. Committee on Public Information.

JOHN MASON BROWN—A dramatic critic and author, John Mason Brown was born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1900. He has an A.B. from Harvard; an L.H.D. from Williams; and a D.Litt. from the University of Montana. Mr. Brown has worked for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, taught history of the theater at the University of Montana during summer sessions, been associate editor and dramatic critic for *Theater Arts Monthly* and staff lecturer for the American Laboratory Theater.

From 1929 to 1941, Mr. Brown was dramatic critic for the *New York Evening Post*. This was followed by a year on the *New York World Telegram*. He has given courses on playwriting and the theater at Yale, at the Middlebury College Breadloaf Writers' Conference, and at Harvard. Since 1944, he has been an associate editor and columnist for *Saturday Review of Literature*. He is also the conductor of a radio program, "Of Men and Books."

During World War II, as a lieutenant in the U.S.N.R., Mr. Brown was on the staff of Vice Admiral Alan Kirk for the invasion of Sicily and Normandy. He has been on inactive duty since December, 1944. Mr. Brown has written many books and articles on the theater.

MARYA MANNES—Mrs. Mannes, author of the very recent novel, *Message from a Stranger*, is a former editor of *Vogue*. As a foreign correspondent she has traveled widely. Her articles have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *American Mercury*, the *New Republic*, *House and Garden* and other magazines. An article on the comics appeared in *New Republic*, February 17, 1947.

no, my child!" his father snatches it away from him in the nick of time. "This book is full of stories of murder, crime, violence, and S-E-X!" he roars.

"But, Pop," whimpered little Kingsblood, "It's Shakespeare!"

"Fancy names don't fool me," replies his father. (*Laughter.*) "I've read those articles by those critics and psychologists. If they are right, Shakespeare is poison for kids. If they're right, Shakespeare is a very bad influence."

Now, comic strips are nothing new. They are as old a form as the written word itself. They are just combinations of pictures and text which tell stories. The Egyptians did them in their own way in the tombs of the Pharaohs. Milton Caniff and I do them now in our own way.

Comic stripers are story tellers, just the same as people who write radio shows, books, and movies. Some of us are right and some of us are wrong. It's the same with psychologists—and even dramatic critics. Some of them are right, some are wrong. But don't worry about the kids. They're usually right. (*Applause.*)

Moderator Denny:

Well, thank you, Al Capp. It seems to me a man who can write such a spontaneous script as that deserves as fine a critic as John Mason Brown, so will you step up, Mr. Brown, and let's hear from you again to start this discussion

here around the mike and I'll stand between you. (*Laughter.*)

Mr. Brown: Mr. Denny and Li'l Abner, may I say that no one could relish more than I do the pictures of the Kinseys at home with little Kingsblood. It's one of the happiest family scenes that I've encountered in a long time.

What bothers me, however, in what Mr. Capp has said and humorously and delightfully said, is not the way of its saying, in this case, but what is really in the sense of it, if there is any sense to it.

He won a great deal of deserved laughter. But actually what he did was to reduce almost every classic that the world has known to sheer junk, merely on the basis of what is synopsis. The point of great writing is not the story alone told. As I tried to hint earlier, it is the treatment given. It is the development, it is the reason for dealing with crime.

The great tragedies have somehow rung ecstasy out of suffering. They don't deal with murder from police court records. They are not tales of people who go in for fratricide and matricide. The comic people go in for insecticide and call that tragedy.

He admits they tell a story, but I go back to the point that what matters is the language used and the point of the storytelling and what is done to the human spirit by those words so released and so employed. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you. Mr. Capp, I guess that calls for a comment from you.

Mr. Capp: I think, since the discussion of comics has now degenerated into a definition of what great writing is, that great storytelling doesn't depend on its form. The comic book is simply a form. Dickens might have written in comic books if he could have gotten a contract with George Hecht. (*Laughter.*) There are writers today who are more vital, who have more talent than anything that appears in things like *The Saturday Evening Post*, or—I'd better stop mentioning these magazines—but who are writing for comic magazines. This I want to say—that the very last outpost of fine, imaginative illustration in America is the comic strip. That's where all the great illustrators are—Milton Caniff, Rae Van Buren, Frank Godwin, Alex Raymond—they're all on the comic pages. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you. Now, Miss Mannes.

Miss Mannes: Before I ask Mr. Hecht a question, I'd just like to say that Mr. Capp has plenty of humor but little humility. Otherwise, he wouldn't speak of himself and Dickens in the same breath because Dickens is a creative artist and Mr. Capp is a conveyor belt. (*Applause and laughter.*)

I'd like to ask Mr. Hecht just in what way he thinks comics are

educational. I refer particularly to the digest of great classics, let us say *Moby Dick*, in comic form.

Mr. Hecht: Children who read digested comics in comic form in very many cases go on to read the complete story in its entirety, just as people when they read digested novels in *The Reader's Digest* are stimulated to read the entire book. It's been definitely demonstrated that children who are readers, children who read comics, also are readers of books. Children who get the habit of reading, through the reading of comic strips, go on to read good books, too. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you. We have time for one more comment, Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown: May I just quickly say that obviously Mr. Hecht—a charming man, has been contaminated by the stuff that he publishes. You have just heard that last statement, and I object to comics because of what they do to the English language. You heard Mr. Hecht say that sometimes children who are teased by comics do read what he calls "the complete story in its entirety." That is supposed to be good English. (*Laughter and applause.*)

May I say that when Mr. Hecht in his first speech said that Mr. Gary and United States Steel Directors and the Corporation read comics—every man of them—at that point the United States Steel sunk to a new low in the history

of the American stock market.
(Applause and laughter.)

Mr. Hecht: I'd like to ask Mr. Brown what his own children think of his opinion of the comic magazine. *(Laughter.)*

Mr. Brown: Mr. Hecht, they have been so corrupted by you that they love them. *(Laughter.)* I tried to confess that I speak as a defeated parent. But they have already, I'm happy to say, begun to discriminate. Before I came here tonight, as a matter of fact, they had taken all the comics in the house away from me because they heard I was going to attack them. *(Laughter.)*

Mr. Denny: Thank you, very much. Now there are a great many people out here in this audience who want to ask questions. Now while we get ready for the question period, I'm sure that you, our lis-

teners, will be interested in the following message.

Announcer: You are listening to America's Town Meeting of the Air, originating in Town Hall, New York, where we are discussing the question, "What's Wrong With the Comics?" We are about to take questions from the audience. If you would like a copy of tonight's discussion, complete with the questions and answers to follow, you may secure one by sending 10c to Town Hall, New York 18, New York.

Also if you would like to have the next eleven issues of our Town Meeting Bulletin starting with this week, enclose \$1.00; for twenty-six issues, enclose \$2.35; or for a full year, enclose \$4.50. Remember the address, Town Hall, New York 18, New York. And please allow about two weeks for delivery.

QUESTIONS, PLEASE!

Mr. Denny: Now we are ready to take questions from our audience, and a truly representative delegation as the Youthbuilders, the whole comic industry has turned out for this discussion. Special delegations from such organizations as the Youth Builders, the Society for the Prevention of Crime, New York Bureau of Child Guidance are with us. Some of the Nations leading comic artists are also here tonight. Just glancing around I see Gus Edson, creator

of Andy Gump; Raeburn Van Buren who draws Abbie and Slats; Harry Haenigsen who provides us with Penny. There's Ernie Bushmiller who's made Nancy and Aunt Fritzie famous, and there's R. M. Brinkerhoff whose Little Mary Mixup is another precocious moppet, and Sam Leff who creates Kurly Kayo and there's Al Posner who draws Sweeney and Sons and Jay Irving, creator of Willie Doodle, and a great many others.

I'm sorry we can't take them all in.

The attendants are in the aisles with portable microphones and members of the audience who want to ask questions are holding up number cards indicating the speaker to whom they want to address their question. We'll start right down here in the aisle with the lady in the hat.

Lady: I'm Clare Edelson, member of the Child Study Association of America and my question is addressed to Mr. John Mason Brown. Because comic books have such a large reading audience, would you say that they act as an intellectual barometer of the American people?

Mr. Brown: I am afraid to say that they act as an intellectual barometer of *adults*. The children have no chance. The children happen to like them. That is, I agree with Miss Mannes that the children are the people who are not as yet able fully to discriminate. But I think they do, alas, from the point of view of the number of elders who read them with blissful and ignorant contentment, prove that they are some barometer of what is the average American intellectual standard. I deplore that.

Mr. Denny: Thank you. Now the man in the balcony.

Man: This is a question for Mr. Capp. In a recent Profile printed in a prominent magazine, he was quoted as saying that only morons

read the comics. In that light, how can he defend his stated views about the fine job the comics are doing?

Mr. Capp: The quote in the *New Yorker* Profile was "Only morons read comics"—did I say comics or my comics? (*Laughter.*) I probably said "my comics." I say this now with all these cartoonists present. Well, at any rate, the quote wasn't exactly mine. It was a statement made by the author of the Profile who had never read my comic strip and then did and attributed this speech to me.

Mr. Denny: Thank you. There is Mr. Edward Lucas, the Executive Director of the Society for the Prevention of Crime who has a question.

Mr. Lucas: My question is addressed to Miss Mannes. Miss Mannes, as there seems to be no reliable clinical evidence in our files or in the files of criminological or psychiatric agencies that I know of that comics are responsible for creating emotional disturbances as you seem to imply, but rather that these disturbances arise out of family or environmental conditions, have you any proof, apart from intuition, that comics are to blame for sublimation and repression? (*Applause.*)

Miss Mannes: I don't remember saying in my speech—and it is printed here—that comics were responsible for the emotional disturbances you mentioned. I have said that comics kill the imagina-

tion, which I consider a crime in itself. But that statement was not in my speech and obviously there is no proof. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you. Well, now, I wish we had the television here now, sure enough, because there's a lovely little tot with a pink ribbon on her head from Juvenile Jury. Come on, sweetheart, let's hear from you.

Little Girl: I'm Robin Morgan from Juvenile Jury. There children come and present their problems and most of the problems, some of them, are "Shall we read funny books or not?"

So, we usually say "yes." But it depends on if the child means a mean, very exciting, murder funny book. Then we definitely say "no." But if it means a happy one like Funny Man, or Mighty Mouse, or Felix the Cat, we will definitely say "yes."

We think that funny books help children to get more acquainted with pictures and help them to get more acquainted with reading. Don't you agree with us? (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Well, bless your heart. Well, does any one of you speakers dare take that little girl on? She's made a nice speech so let's go on with the young man down here. I think they all agree with you, dear. Yes?

Man: Mr. Brown, in the *Newark Star Ledger*, famous stories of literature are told in comic form. Does this not present a

good method of teaching children these famous stories?

Mr. Brown: No, sir! May quickly say to tell great stories, good stories, or amusing stories comic form is to destroy them. Because a story is written in words does not mean it can be reduced to pictures. Had the writer, a good writer, wanted to tell the story that way, he would have turned artist—if he could have—but I chose his medium because he excelled at it.

This country takes to synopses all the time, thinking that if it has read a synopsis it has read the original. I personally have tried to point out that we, as readers, suffer under the national misapprehension that if we have seen an ice cube we have seen a glacier.

The plot of the story is in the story, in picture form or another form. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you, Mr. Brown. The gentleman there is in the back of the house.

Man: I propose my question to Mr. Hecht. What is regarded as a moral value of a comic? Do you think religious viewpoints should be introduced into comics to combat the influence they have regard to murder, theft, and immoralities?

Mr. Hecht: There are some comic magazines that tell the story of the Bible. I think that comic magazines can tell good spiritual lessons and can teach history and science and I think the education

and religious and industrial use of comics is just in its infancy. I think the schools and the churches will all in time be using comics as a means of mass education. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Mr. Brown is about to squirm out of his chair. Yes?

Mr. Brown: I can't resist this.

(*Laughter.*) I knew the picture was bad, but I didn't know it would ever become so melancholy that of a Sabbath we would assemble in church to hear comics substituted for the gospel! (*Laughter and applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you. The gentleman down here on the aisle.

Man: My question is addressed to Mr. Al Capp. Mr. Capp, do you think that crime and murder comics are minor factors that sometimes lead to juvenile delinquency?

Mr. Capp: No, I don't. I think it's ridiculous to think that kids are so weak-minded that the reading of a detective comic strip will do anything but amuse them for the moment. I think that detective and murder comic strips are a bad influence on Mr. Brown but they don't upset kids that much. (*Laughter.*)

Mr. Denny: No doubt about it, Mr. Capp, they have upset Mr. Brown. All right, the gentleman in the balcony.

Man: I'm Raeburn Van Buren who does the "Abbie and Slats" comic strip and I've just listened to Mr. Brown's hymn of hate. I just wonder if it is possible for

Mr. Brown to give a fair criticism of comics when he is so consumed with hate that he couldn't possibly have followed the comic strips long enough to give them a fair trial. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Mr. Brown, would you care to come up here and comment on that?

Mr. Brown: Who is the person? Where is he?

Mr. Denny: He's right up there in the balcony. There, with the receding forehead.

Mr. Brown: Sir, may I quickly say that I, in my youth, did read comic strips assiduously. I, in my youth—which is receding—was only exposed to them once a week.

I was brought up on "Little Nemo" which was innocuous enough. I was brought up on "Buster Brown," which, Heaven knows, did not hurt. I was brought up even on Mutt and Jeff, but I did have "Desperate Desmond"—curses!

I do not regularly read the comics now. I cannot pretend that, as an adult, I follow your pursuits. You apparently read them all the time. I do, however, feel that I have read enough of them to abhor them. There is an old critical jargon, a phrase, which insists you don't have to eat the whole of a rotten egg to know that it's rotten. (*Laughter and applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you, Mr. Brown. Now, Mr. Capp, have you a comment?

Mr. Capp: I thought Mr. Brown

didn't read comics, but after hearing that he did as a child, I give up. (*Laughter.*) The fact that he read comics as a kid, and it has made this kind of man out of him is proof that they are bad. (*Laughter and applause.*)

Mr. Denny: All right, thank you, Mr. Capp. We're almost getting personal here. All right, the gentleman over there on the side aisle.

Man: Miss Mannes. My name is Henry Braun, unattached. I don't belong to Juvenile Jury or anything else.

Mr. Denny: Does that mean single? (*Laughter.*)

Man: Single, too.

Mr. Denny: It pays to advertise. (*Laughter.*)

Man: I'll hire you.

The question: If this war-worn world of alleged adults is the result of dreams, play, and imagination in childhood, should we not bless comics as one possible panacea for peace? (*Laughter and applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Do you want him to repeat that, Miss Mannes.

Miss Mannes: I find it a little obscure. (*Laughter.*) Could you say it another way?

Man: I like it this way. (*Laughter.*) I'll say it more slowly. If this war-worn world of alleged adults—alleged, mind you—is the result of dreams, play, and imagination in their childhood, shouldn't we bless comics as one possible panacea for peace?

Miss Mannes: Well, I think it is a little early to tell. The generation that is reading comics now got the world in its hands and it doesn't seem so hot at the moment.

Mr. Denny: Thank you. Mr. Hecht referred to Miss Jose Frank of the Child Study Association who advises some of the comic writers. I think we'd like to hear from Miss Frank at the time.

Miss Frank: Mr. Brown, I would like to talk to you, please.

Mr. Denny: Mr. Brown, the lady would have a word with you, would you step out please?

Miss Frank: Mr. Brown, in the February 14 issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, you wrote a charming article on a little trip you took with your children, a cultural trip, I believe, to the Museum, to show them the tapestries and found, surprisingly to you, that they were only interested in the murderous ones. What you said was, may I quote your words, "To the young, suffering is almost unimaginable, death inconceivable. Pain is not real to them. Violence is. And this, quite naturally, they see as an expression of vigor, a manifestation of health and adventure."

Now, I would like to ask you, in view of the fact that in the hands of responsible comic publishers this is what is done in comics, how does it happen that

in so short a time you have changed your mind?

Mr. Brown: I haven't changed my mind, such as it is if existent, not one bit. What I was talking about then was death in terms of what is death in the better kind of writing, or even in the comics. But I don't think all the comics, in spite of what's been said here tonight, are concerned with death. If you happen to have seen such things as even Krazy Kat, or if you have seen the good Walt Disney's, you know that mayhem is just as active a concern as death itself.

The children are concerned with murder; they do like brutality. No one can deny that. I tried to tell in the same piece in the *Saturday Review*—again a house plug—that when my children were a little younger they used to come into the bathroom hopefully every morning when I shaved and they used to say, "Have you cut yourself, Daddy? Any blood, Daddy?" (*Laughter.*)

It is, perhaps, because they want my blood, and men do grow up wanting other people's blood that I'm against what is the wanton cruelty, the unmotivated cruelty, the wholesome cruelties of the comics.

Mr. Denny: Thank you. The gentleman right down here. Yes.

Man: My name is Charles Biro, editor of Lev Gleason comics. In view of the fact that our magazines, *Crime Does Not Pay*, and *Daredevil Comics*, have received more

than 60,000 letters from teachers, clergymen, prison wardens, and former juvenile delinquents stating that lessons learned from these magazines were responsible for lessening juvenile crime, don't you think that this alone overrides any other consideration and makes moral lessons taught by good comic magazines one of the greatest forces for good in our country?

Miss Mannes: I'm afraid not, because there can be 60,000 unintelligent teachers and jurist as well as 100,000 intelligent ones. It proves nothing to my mind. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you. A question from the balcony. Yes?

Man: Mr. Denny, my name is Gus Edson. I draw the Gumps. I'd like to ask Mr. Brown a question. Mr. Brown, since you have, as a youth, only read *Buster Brown* and innocuous stuff like that, to what do you attribute your unhappy attitude today — ulcers? (*Laughter.*)

Mr. Brown: Ulcers? What a ridiculous question. I have had them out long ago! (*Laughter and applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you, Mr. Brown. Now, while our speakers prepare their summaries or final comments on tonight's question, here's a special message of interest to each of you.

Announcer: In connection with Town Meeting's 500th broadcast on March 16th, Town Hall is publishing a 52-page booklet contain-

ing a complete listing of 500 Town Meeting programs with subjects and speakers and an alphabetical list of all speakers cross-indexed to show the programs in which each one participated.

Complimentary copies will be sent to all former Town Meeting speakers, radio editors, station managers and sponsors. But since each year at about this time we receive so many requests from program chairmen for suggestions for programs and speakers, we have had some additional copies run off for any program chairman or interested listeners who may want them.

If you would like a copy of this 52-page illustrated booklet of the first 500 Town Meeting programs, send your request to Town Hall, New York 18, New York and be sure to enclose \$1.00 to cover the cost of printing and mailing. Ask for the booklet, "500 Hours." The address is Town Hall, New York 18, New York.

Now for the summaries of tonight's discussion, here is Mr. Denny.

Mr. Denny: Now, a final word from Al Capp.

Mr. Capp: I won't be difficult. I agree, a lot of comics aren't very good, but also a lot of books aren't very good; a lot of plays aren't very good; and a lot of dramatic criticism is garbage. But they are not good or bad because they're written in book form or dramatic form or because it appears in the Saturday

day Review of Literature, but because they're created by good artists or bad ones.

Now, Mr. Brown is sorry that Li'l Abner isn't Huckleberry Finn. I'm sorry Mr. Brown isn't George G. Nathan. (*Laughter and applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you, Al Capp. Now Miss Marya Mannes please.

Miss Mannes: My fight against comics is that they kill time. They kill time that a child could use playing, learning, and imagining—the three roots of growth. Because most comics are ugly, they blight taste. Because a great many make a rule of violence, they blight ethics. Because they are primitive in form and content, their highest appeal is to illiteracy and laziness. I believe that an indiscriminate diet of comics can produce an uncivilized and immature race. (*Applause.*)

Mr. Denny: Thank you, Marya Mannes. Now, a final word from George Hecht.

Mr. Hecht: Criticize the comics as much as you wish. We like to have you talk about them. It's good publicity. The facts remain.

(1) that the comics supply millions of children and adults each day with good humor and exciting stories which interest and entertain them.

(2) that the comics can and will become a great medium of mass education, the potential usefulness

of which is as yet scarcely realized.
(Applause.)

Mr. Denny: Thank you, Mr. Hecht. Now, Al Capp is waiting for a final word from John Mason Brown.

Mr. Brown: I don't care how popular comics are with the young or worse still with the old. They seem to me to be sad proofs of arrested undevelopment. Time in the modern world is no longer something to be wasted. The moment has overtaken us, whether we like it or not and most of us do not, when as a people we must grow up. In order to grow up, we must put behind us that fear of the best and that passion for the mediocre which most Americans cultivate. *(Applause.)*

Mr. Denny: Thank you, John Mason Brown, Mr. Hecht, Miss Mannes, and Al Capp for a thoroughly delightful and illuminating discussion, and our thanks also to Paul Sheldon of our Town Hall staff for the idea for this program. I think you all agree it was a success. *(Applause.)*

Now, remember friends, if you want a copy of this discussion complete with questions and answers, you may obtain it by sending ten cents to Town Hall, New York 18,

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Next week, we return to an important phase of the Marshall Plan now being debated in Congress. A question in the minds of millions of Americans and Congressmen as they consider giving or lending seventeen billion dollars to European nations. Our subject will be "Is Our Free Enterprise System Threatened by European Socialism?"

Our speakers will be Senator Owen Brewster, Republican of Maine; Geoffrey Crowther, author and Editor-in-Chief of the London Economist; Maynard Krueger, associate professor of Economics at the University of Chicago; and Otto E. Koegel, New York attorney and chief counsel for 20th-Century Fox Film Corporation.

Our special guest of honor on next week's program will be the winner of a Town Meeting contest conducted by Station WENR in Chicago. He is Mr. Allen Simpson of 6010 Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, whom the judges selected on the basis of his entry in a letter contest on the subject, "What Free Speech Means to Me." So plan to be with us next week and every Tuesday at the sound of the Crier's Bell. *(Applause.)*



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